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Miracles and the Miraculous.

R. A. JAMIESON, M.A., M.D.

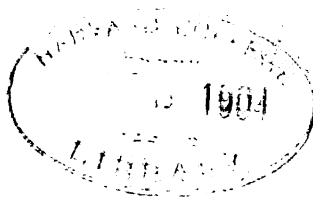
VEN. ARCHDEACON MOULE, B.D.

A ROMAN CATHOLIC PRIEST.

SHANGHAI :
"NORTH-CHINA HERALD" OFFICE.

1885.

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ON
THE CREDIBILITY OF MIRACLES

A SPEECH
DELIVERED BEFORE THE SHANGHAI LITERARY AND
DEBATING SOCIETY

ON
TUESDAY EVENING, 3RD MARCH, 1885

BY
R. A. JAMIESON, M.A., M.D.

SHORTHAND REPORT, REVISED AND ANNOTATED.

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1885

ON
THE CREDIBILITY OF MIRACLES.

THE argument in brief is that, while the existence of a Personal Ruler of the Universe must be assumed in order to render miracles conceivable, the nobler the conception that is formed of such a Being the more incredible do miracles become, and therefore the more probably false the documents which record them.

And if the prophet be deceived when he hath spoken a thing, I the Lord have deceived that prophet, and I will stretch out my hand upon him, and will destroy him.—*Ezekiel* xiv., 9.

MR. CHAIRMAN, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, the rules of this Society implicitly permit the speakers in any debate to bring forward arguments which they do not really trust, and to espouse, and even earnestly urge, views and opinions to which they do not at all subscribe. And I think, Sir, the permission is a wise one, because the primary object of our Society is not by any means to refute error or disseminate truth. Its ordinary function is far more modest. We meet to exercise ourselves and one another in debate, to cultivate the art of public speaking, and to learn how to overcome that importunate bashfulness which is constantly pulling at an inexperienced speaker's coat-tails while he is addressing an audience. But on an occasion like this, when a subject is to be discussed which involves the dearest interests of so many whose opinions are entitled to the highest respect, I beg you to believe that I shall endeavour to set the question with absolute fairness before you, that I shall adduce no argument which does not recommend itself by its soundness, and that I shall profess no view which is not accompanied in my mind by a conviction of its truth.

The resolution which I have to lay before you reads as follows :—

That the introduction of the Miraculous Element into Religious History diminishes or abolishes the claims of that history to credibility and consequent influence.

Let me at once proceed to narrow as far as may be the issue before us. I think it is clear that all the elements which can enter into any history, religious or secular, may be divided exhaustively under three heads :—first, those which are certainly or probably true ; secondly, those which are certainly or probably false, and, thirdly, those which whether they be true or false are in either case trivial. With regard to the first class, it is quite certain that those elements which are certainly or probably true cannot have any tendency whatsoever to diminish or abolish the credibility of the history of which they form a part. With regard to the third class, I have too much consideration for your time and patience to enter on the consideration of any elements in religious history which are obviously trivial. For I am sure that whichever side any of us may be disposed to take in this debate, you would all be of one mind in

thinking that I was only outraging your endurance if I were to discuss the credibility or possibility of pictures winking, statues perspiring, and so forth. The only elements, then, which we need at all consider are those which are certainly or probably false; and I shall have accomplished my task to-night if I show that miracles enter into this class.

Now, dare we assert that any phenomenon whatsoever is in the nature of things absolutely impossible? We dare not assert it, and for this simple reason, namely, that as all our knowledge is relative, we know absolutely nothing about the nature of things in themselves. But there are classes of events which we can prove to be so excessively improbable that if they are not impossible then human judgment is worth nothing. And that, Sir, brings me to the point as I shall argue it. I shall leave to others the treatment of many subordinate questions, such as the notable worthlessness of testimony given by ignorant, interested or credulous persons, the lack of any independent evidence to the reality of any miracle whatsoever, the extraordinary difference that exists between a fact and its interpretation or embellishment—thus leaving an opening whereby to admit the simple good faith of the story tellers supposing the records to be genuine; finally the many questions which arise as to the genuineness of the records themselves. All these points with others I shall pass by. I shall follow one straight line of argument to which I beseech your attention, as each proposition after the first will rigorously follow from what precedes.

If the universe were a chaos without moral or physical law, there would be no reason whatsoever why anything should not occur; but if, as human conscience and judgment assure us, there is an invariable order governing events as they occur in the universe, then occurrences do not take place out of that order. So surely has inherited and acquired experience convinced us of this, that if any extraordinary phenomenon were to present itself here this evening—if, for instance, one of these benches were to rise apparently of its own accord towards the ceiling, there is not one of us who would so much as think of a miracle. We should attribute it to the working of some hidden machinery; and even if we could not discover how it was managed we should be none the less convinced that it was due to nothing more mysterious than some cleverly concealed contrivance. In fact a miracle occurring in a civilized community in a scientific

age is inconceivable. I trust that some subsequent speaker will take up these very important points, that no modern miracle resists scientific investigation, and that as science advances miracles recede. I can merely glance at this argument in passing, but it deserves development. We are happily far removed from that credulous age when, as you no doubt remember, a king was politely asked whether he would take as a sign that the shadow should go backwards or forwards upon the sun-dial. To the choice thus offered him he responded by desiring that the shadow should go backwards, because, said he "it is a light thing for the shadow to go down ten degrees." That is to say it was nothing to be wondered at if the earth suddenly span round on her axis so as to turn eight o'clock in the morning into six o'clock in the evening. People in such a stage of knowledge and in such a frame of mind will believe anything, and believing it will relate it. But we are not so easily satisfied, and a school boy who should now-a-days make Hezekiah's idiotic remark would justly be beaten with many stripes. Yet we cannot believe that truth has changed within twenty-six centuries.

The alternative therefore that I shall lay before you is this, that you shall either abandon your intelligence, your reasoned experience, and your conscience, and believe miracles possible, or that you shall claim your share in that hardly earned and imperishable birth-right of human knowledge and conscience, and declare that every recorded miracle is false.* My opponent may tell you that inasmuch as certain events have been revealed to us, we are bound to abandon our judgment and accept the alleged revelation. But such an argument is self-destructive. It asks you to conclude by means of your judgment that your judgment is worthless; it asks you to climb a tree, and when you

* It is conceivable that an opponent might say "the question is not about individual miracles, but about the miraculous element in religious history." But, in the first place, the miraculous element in any history must lie either in the source of the history, which has to be determined by considerations drawn from its contents, or in the contents themselves. In either case, therefore, the contents supply the material to be tested. In the second place, the upholders of a miraculous element which does not injuriously affect the credibility and influence of a given history which contains it, should remember that that is but a poor theory which fails as soon as it is applied to concrete examples.

have reached the top you are expected to take your power of climbing as a proof that you cannot climb. For in the last resort it is to human judgment that we have to apply to decide whether a revelation is real or not, and whether acceptance of it is binding or not. Human judgment is in any case the ultimate arbiter, and my task is to enquire how miracles stand examination before that tribunal.

But first it is necessary that I should define a miracle. I have no doubt my opponent is too good a churchman to object to the definition given by St. Thomas Aquinas. And if you will forgive me for reading two lines of Latin, I will, in order to prevent misconception, reproduce that definition in the Angelic Doctor's own words :—

*Illa igitur simpliciter miracula dicenda sunt, quæ divinitus fiunt præter ordinem communiter servatum in rebus.**

I may translate this as follows :

Those events alone are properly termed miracles which, not being in accordance with the ordinary course of nature, are brought about by divine providence.

Let us develop this definition. In the first place it has to be noticed that a miracle must be a phenomenon out of accordance with the ordinary course of nature. And here I may suitably refer to an argument which has very frequently been brought against miracles. It is a rough and ready one, and to my mind an exceedingly bad one. I will not lead you into any vain digression ; but it is advisable that we should get some idea of what is meant by laws of nature before we consider the possibility of events occurring which contravene those laws. "Miracles," say some, "are impossible and inconceivable because they contradict the ascertained laws of nature." The answer to which is but too obvious. The objection presupposes a complete and exhaustive knowledge of natural law. But what we understand as "laws of nature" are not laws promulgated by a law-giver. They are all of human invention—they are, in fact, nothing more than condensed statements of the order and manner in which phenomena follow one another.†

* *Contra Gentiles*, iii. 101.

† Id quod propositio universalis per inductionem experimentalem formata exprimit, vocari solet *lex physica* si ad entia irrationalia pertinet; *lex moralis* si ad rationalia. In quibus appellationibus *lex* idem sonat ac *modus constans et uniformis quem agens in agendo servat*. SALVATOR TONGIORGUS :—*Institutiones Philosophicæ*, lib. iv., cap. ii., art. 4.

Mere observation or rude experiment on simple phenomena gives the hint of a certain order. More elaborate experiment renders the statement of this supposed order more probable, or causes it to be modified, or perhaps leads to its being rejected altogether. In either of the first two cases the hypothesis is taken as a working one, and the circumstances of still more complex phenomena are computed. If the results of computation are found in a vast number and variety of instances to be in agreement with the results of observation, the hypothesis attains that high degree of probability which we call certainty, and we register it as a "law." Wherein, please mark that the certainty which we attribute to the laws of nature is only a moral certainty, and arises solely out of the improbability that a false principle should in a vast variety of instances invariably enable us to predict accurately the succession of phenomena. But it is evident that any law thus arrived at may be only a particular case of a more comprehensive law which we have not yet reached. And therefore theoretically a so-called miracle may be the outcome of some higher law than any we have yet formulated. A mathematician can construct the equation to a curve which shall follow a regular and uniform course for any distance you please, and then suddenly loop or disappear or commit some other vagary, and immediately afterwards proceed as at first. Or a series can be found which shall go on with monotonous and evident regularity for any number of terms not infinite, and then apparently stagger about for a while, eventually resuming its orderly career. It is moving in order all the time though not in accordance with the law which might reasonably be deduced from observation of a large but limited number of terms. Clearly, therefore, the argument against miracles drawn from the apparent order of nature is fallacious. But this view, which is undoubtedly sound, and perfectly efficacious against one class of opponents, is useless and even dangerous to those who uphold miracles. For as soon as any event declared to be miraculous enters into the order of nature in obedience to higher law, it loses its miraculous character, and with it all the value which that character, if sustained, would impart to it as testimony.

Next, we have to remark that the definition of miracles involves the existence of a personal ruler of the universe. If there were no such Being the occurrence of miracles would be inconceivable and time taken up in discussing their credibility

and influence would be time wasted. And although we have logically no right to assume the existence of a God, that being a matter for discussion and proof, I will, in order to obtain a common standing ground with my opponent, make the required concession and assume that the world is governed by a personal Being absolute in power, perfect in knowledge, of ineffable morality, and whose will is embodied in moral and physical law. If this be our conception of God we cannot conceive of his acting wildly, without purpose or in such a way as to contradict his moral attributes. Were such a Being to interrupt the ordinary course of nature, it would certainly be with a purpose at once moral and of paramount importance, for a miracle which was not at the same time a testimony to some otherwise unattainable truth or a means to some necessary and moral end not to be reached by ordinary natural operations* would be merely a piece of arbitrary foolishness. You will observe that this is the only criterion that we possess whereby to distinguish between miracles of divine origin and the diabolical variety. Yet even this often fails us. When Aaron, as we are told, cast down his rod before Pharaoh and it became a serpent, the magicians did in like manner with their enchantments, and although Aaron's rod gobbled up the others it would be childish to argue that the amusing voracity which brought about a difference in the result implied any real difference in the miraculous power exerted.

I refer to this in passing, as also to the impossibility of distinguishing between the miracles claimed by different sects, each of which derides the miracles of the others, or between the miracles belonging to different ages in religious history. I trust that others will take up these points. I must confine myself to those miracles which are admittedly of divine origin if they occurred at all.

Such miracles then I would finally define as

Attesting phenomena out of accordance with the ordinary course of nature, produced by the will of an all-wise, all-powerful and moral Being for some wise, moral and necessary end unattainable by the ordinary operation of natural laws.

* *Miraculum præter naturam est "quando eo modo producitur quo nequit a natura procedere."* SCHOUPEE: *Elementa Theologiae Dogmaticæ*. Tract. II. De Religione Revelata, Cap. 2.

Bearing this definition carefully in mind, let us first consider the matter generally, and then apply the test furnished by the definition to some of the more remarkable miracles related in the Bible.

A miracle should be a special revelation of God to man.* Now we cannot conceive of a revelation imparted by an infinitely wise and benevolent Being which is not designed to give a more accurate conception of that Being than could be reached by mere human endeavour. To that pure and beneficent intelligence it must be even clearer than it is to us that the only possibility of man successfully struggling against the forces of nature, bending them to his will and making of them instruments wherewith he may glorify his Creator, and hew out his own perfection if haply that may ever be attained, lies in his recognition and comprehension of the order in which phenomena occur, and in his power of predicting and providing against events, based upon a knowledge of invariable moral and physical laws governing the universe. Are we, then, to believe that this wise and benevolent Being chooses to illustrate the fact of his existence, and to prove the stability of his throne, the immutability of his laws, and the morality of his nature, by showing from time to time, on the most trivial occasions and to produce the most contemptible results, that no such thing as either physical or moral law exists, and that the phenomena of nature and of morals are a chaos of arbitrary events? The supposition is absurd. It will be no answer if my opponent says "What are we, worms of the earth, that we should judge the measures of our Creator?" For intelligence is intelligence, always the same in kind though varying in quantity and degree from one intelligent Being to another. And it is inconceivable that any Being, no matter how high or how low in intelligence, should seek to prove a proposition by establishing its contradictory.

Instead however of talking round and round the subject and arguing the question upon abstract principles, it will be better, perhaps, if I take a few of the miracles recorded in the Bible and enquire how they bear the test supplied by the definition. Let me read that definition once more:—

Miracles should be attesting phenomena out of accordance with the ordinary course of nature, produced by the will of an all-wise, all-powerful and moral Being, for some wise,

* *Miraculum "certum est divinæ approbationis seu auctoritatis argumentum."* *ib.*

moral and necessary end, unattainable by the ordinary operation of natural laws.

We assume that if a miracle be a revelation of a moral Being it will not outrage our moral sense. If a moral sense is implanted in us, no matter how, a revelation which outrages that moral sense is a revelation of a Being lower than ourselves. What, then, shall we say about that remarkable series of miracles known as the Ten Plagues of Egypt? Just recall for a moment the circumstances to your memories. Moses and Aaron are sent on repeated occasions to Pharaoh to demand the liberation of the people of Israel. The King pays no heed, for this very excellent reason, that God had previously purposely hardened his heart that he should not let the people go.* Let us grant that Pharaoh was a notorious sinner to start with. There is no proof of it, but anyhow what had the myriads of the Egyptian people done? Every drop of water in Egypt is turned into blood. Spare me the ridiculous and ghastly catalogue of frogs, lice, flies and so forth, each of which torments fell upon the innocent myriads of Pharaoh's people—for what purpose? To

* In *Exodus* iv. 21, some time before Moses and Aaron made their first appeal to Pharaoh, the Lord announced his intention of hardening the King's heart. In *Exodus* vii. 3, immediately before the first solemn summons to Pharaoh, the same declaration was made. Immediately after that summons, and before the threat of the first plague was uttered, the story is explicit enough:—"And he hardened Pharaoh's heart that he hearkened not unto them; as the Lord had said." This disposes of a possible verbal objection, to the effect that it is only after the sixth, eighth, ninth and tenth plagues that the subsequent narrative expressly states that "the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh." A quibble of this kind is scarcely worthy of notice. The words in the original which are translated "Pharaoh's heart was hardened" (after the first, third, fifth and seventh plagues), and "Pharaoh hardened his heart" (after the second, fourth and seventh plagues), mean literally that Pharaoh's heart became hardened, was made hard or was heavy. But even if there be any difference implied, this does not alter the case. For, an infinite and omnipotent Being, supposing such a Being to exist, must be held morally responsible for whatever he permits.

It may, of course, be replied, that the morals of the Deity are revealed for the purpose of exciting our astonishment, and not by any means for the purpose of supplying us with a pattern for imitation.

punish Pharaoh, and to punish Pharaoh—because God had hardened his heart! Let us hasten to the horrible end. I cannot read with composure the cynical account of that final crime, although I am convinced that it is as false as it is wickedly conceived. Judge for yourselves. "But the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he would not let them go." Mark that. "And the Lord said unto Moses, yet will I bring one plague more upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt; afterwards he will let you go, he shall surely thrust you out hence altogether." Then follow directions for the plunder of the Egyptians under the guise of borrowing; and the sacred narrative continues: "Thus saith the Lord, about midnight will I go out into the midst of Egypt; and all the first-born in the land of Egypt shall die, from the first-born of Pharaoh that sitteth upon his throne, even unto the first-born of the maid-servant that is behind the mill; and all the first-born of beasts. And there shall be a great cry throughout all the land of Egypt, such as there was none like it, nor shall be like it any more. . . . and it came to pass that at midnight the Lord smote all the first-born in the land of Egypt from the first-born of Pharaoh that sat on his throne unto the first-born of the captive that was in the dungeon, and all the first-born of cattle. And Pharaoh rose up in the night, he and all his servants, and all the Egyptians; and there was a great cry in Egypt, for there was not a house where there was not one dead."

Has any one of you, fathers and mothers, chanced to lose a child? Were you all unhappily in that case, and could you arrive at the monstrous opinion that the punishment might possibly have been inflicted by a supreme over-ruling Power, not on you only, but simultaneously on hundreds of thousands of your fellow countrymen, for no fault of theirs or yours, but because the governor of your country was compelled by that same Power to follow a certain course of action, you would need nothing beyond this base recital to convince you that either the Supreme Ruler of the universe is not a moral Being (which is contrary to supposition) or that the story of this miracle is utterly and entirely false.

Do you want another instance? Crowds of similar cases, varying in atrocity, swarm to my recollection.

"Again the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he moved David against them to say, Go to, number Israel

and Judah."* David obeyed this divinely inspired voice, "so the Lord sent a pestilence upon Israel, and there died of the people seventy thousand men." Or what about Elisha cursing to such good purpose "in the name of the Lord" the little children on the road to Bethel who ran out and mischievously made faces at him, that two she-bears came "out of the wood and tare forty and two children of them?" Poor infants!† Or shall we speak of the fig tree upon which there were no figs "for the time of figs was not yet;" but which was cursed all the same for its lack of fruit, so that presently it withered away? It is true that two out of the four evangelists are ashamed to tell the story, or perhaps never heard of it.

From the moral side, therefore, if we are to retain our conception of God we must reject these miracles, and those I have cited are, as you all know, only examples taken more or less at random.

But further, the purpose of a miracle must, according to the definition, be a necessary end unattainable by the ordinary operation of natural laws. There must be some otherwise unattainable end in view in order to render a miracle reasonable. As a thoroughly bad example of this, take the case of the young man whose axe-head fell into the Jordan, a wretched little stream something like as to size the Soochow Creek in its palmy days, and who knew exactly where it fell. You or I would say that he might fetch it up easily enough, or leave it there for that matter.

* 2 Samuel xiv. 1. In 1 Chron. xxi. the main credit for this incident is accorded to the devil. But whichever potentate acted directly, the passage cited in the text makes it clear that it was "the Lord" who instigated, or caused to be instigated, an action which he had determined to punish.

† The adjective "little" or "small" is prefixed in the original to the word here translated "children," which latter word is translated "young men" (plural) in *Ruth* ii. 15 and (singular) 2 Samuel xviii. 5, and "servants" in *Nehemiah* iv. 23. In these passages, however, there is no adjective. The same phrase is found in 1 Kings iii. 7 where, as proved by the context, it is correctly translated "a little child." It is therefore clear that little children (*pueri parvi*, *Vulg.*) and not young men are meant.

This, however, is a matter of small moment, although something has illegitimately been made of it. The older the offenders were, the more incredible is the story from the physical point of view. The younger they were, the more revolting is it from the moral side.

Not so Elisha, who immediately arrests the orderly progress of the entire universe—that the awkward workman may be saved a scolding. "And the man of God said, where fell it? And he showed him the place. And he cut down a stick, and cast it in thither; and the iron did swim." Was there ever a more ridiculous disproportion between means and ends, or a worse illustration of the wisdom of God? I fear we must cut this miracle and its like adrift also if we desire to save the ship.

Or will you have another story equally effective? It shall be my last.

Hezekiah, a Syrian kinglet, was suffering from a boil.* Now, ladies and gentlemen, a boil is a very unpleasant thing; yet here in Shanghai we often manage to get rid of even more than one without the assistance of either a prophet or a miracle. No doubt this particular boil had been abominably ill-treated. Petty kings are not always fortunate in their doctors. Happily the prophet Isaiah called on Hezekiah, and being a sensible fellow at bottom, he recommended a poultice. But Hezekiah was not to be put off with an irregular practitioner's poultice, so he modestly demanded a miracle to prove that he should be well in three days. And the prophet, as obliging as the king was modest, offered to hurry the earth on in her course, or to send her back on her course, whichever might be most agreeable, in order to back up his prescription. The shadow went backwards ten degrees, six o'clock in the evening became eight o'clock in the morning, and Hezekiah was luckily satisfied.†

* In the original, a "burning place" or "ulcer." The same word is used in *Exodus* ix. 9. "Sick unto death" simply means very sick. The phrase may be compared with the vulgar expressions in the local dialect:—"Hot as death," "cold as death," "old as death," "sick as death," and so on.

† It may be said, with regard to this miracle and that of the "sun and moon standing still," that the effect was produced by some local interference with natural appearances, and not by any arrest or disturbance of the heavenly bodies. Upon which theory three remarks suggest themselves. First, that it is destructive to the view which it is framed to support. For, if in accordance with any accepted principle of interpretation any historical document is held to say one thing while another thing is meant, its claims to independent authority instantly vanish. Secondly, that it is useless. For, as there is no gradation in miracles, extra-natural interferences with the ordinary course of phenomena, limited to any area however small, and the

Now suppose for an instant that this were true; that the earth was arrested in her rotation, and span backward, then stopped again, and went forward as usual; suppose that the sudden fluxes and refluxes of the ocean had left a single continent unsubmerged or a single living creature undrowned; suppose that there was no concomitant disturbance of the motion of revolution, and no transformation of the arrested motion into heat; suppose all this, yet what are we to think of the disturbance of the relative apparent positions of the heavenly bodies which would have left a record on the midnight sky legible to all succeeding ages? Of course you may say that the same almighty and divine Power which produced the miracle prevented these far reaching effects, but no one out of a mad-house can possibly believe that an all-wise Being would so stupendously upset the universe in order to prove to a Syrian sheikh that a poultice is a good thing for a boil, and would apply equally stupendous energy to blot out every trace of his interference. There is no sign of either wisdom, necessity or morality in such a miracle, and therefore we must either reject the story or alter our conception of God.

And so if your patience could hold out I might go on analyzing miracle after miracle with the same results. Results which I will formulate thus—that you must either give up your God or give up miracles. There is no middle course. I might parody the cry that once resounded from Carmel,—How long halt ye between two opinions? If the Lord be God, follow him; but if he be the capricious, unreasonable, immoral Being depicted in your miraculous legends, then follow any other human invention rather than one degrading to your intelligence.

I believe, Sir, that were it possible for us to rise from our graves a thousand years hence, we should find religion flourishing

most stupendous interruptions of cosmical order are equally credible—or incredible. Therefore, nothing is gained by minimising miracles. Thirdly, that it is degrading, in that it reduces miracles, remarkable at least for the audacity of their conception, to the level of conjuring tricks. For a conjuring trick is neither more nor less than the production of an effect by one means while the spectators are induced to believe that the effect is produced by some other means.

with a healthier, because a truer, life than it possesses to-day. Among the conquests which man will then have achieved will doubtless be a system of practical ethics based upon universally accepted principles derived from the matured and coordinated experience of social needs. But alongside of this cold and mathematical system, there will be other systems working harmoniously to the same end, but based on the emotions rather than on the intelligence, investing duty with the garb of poetic feeling, softening its chaste and severe outlines, and for the initiated replacing the reign of law by the reign of love. Among such systems Christianity, dissociated from a childish cosmogony, stripped of its fantastic fables, divested of its unintelligible doctrines, and strengthened and beautified by the loss of all its mythological and miraculous accidents, will still present the Ideal of personal example, of a pure and lovely life as the highest and most irresistible motive to a noble and unselfish rule of living.*

* It is no part of my business to suggest a line of argument to my opponents. But it appears to me that it is a mistake for Christian advocates to appeal to ordinary canons of judgment in the hope of finding a reason for their beliefs. There are many sources of knowledge, but knowledge itself is the sum of true ideas. Now, the idea of the Beautiful, for example, as conceived by cultivated people is doubtless a true idea, although it is relative to the degree of cultivation present and is not arrived at by means of the judgment. It is founded on the emotions. We feel that such or such an object of thought is beautiful without always being able to justify that feeling by any argument free from technical fallacy. And so it would be at least intelligible if miracles were upheld simply on the ground that they form an integral part of a system which in the minds of certain people carries with it a profound conviction of its truth and necessity. But there is no logic of feeling, and therefore the force of this contention must always be personal or, at widest, sectional. Nor can it ever be possible to construct a logic of the emotions to correspond with the logic of the intellect, for these reasons:—first, that terms could not in the former case be replaced by arbitrary symbols as they can be in the latter; and, secondly, that there is no standard of emotional judgment, what one person feels keenly to be a true conclusion from emotional premises, rousing no similar picture in the imagination of another.



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THE CREDIBILITY OF THE MIRACULOUS

A SPEECH

DELIVERED BEFORE THE SHANGHAI LITERARY AND
DEBATING SOCIETY

ON

TUESDAY EVENING, 3RD MARCH, 1885

BY THE

VEN. ARCHDEACON MOULE, B.D.

REVISED, WITH NOTES AND A SHORT APPENDIX
TREATING OF CERTAIN MIRACLES RELATED IN THE
OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS

RESOLUTION :

"That the introduction of the miraculous element into Religious History diminishes or abolishes the claims of that history to credibility and consequent influence." .

LEADER OF THE NEGATIVE : ARCHDEACON MOULE.

ON
THE CREDIBILITY OF THE MIRACULOUS.

Dei voluntas, rerum natura est.—St. Augustine.

MR. CHAIRMAN, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN—I think I shall best consult the interests of the debate by declining to follow my opponent through what I make bold to describe as his somewhat irrelevant discourse (Note A.) The subject before the meeting is not this miracle or that miracle, but the miraculous element; and I beg therefore to recall the attention of the meeting to the subject before us. Dr. Jamieson has so far disobeyed the instructions of the Chair that he has wounded, not the faith, not the convictions, but the religious feelings and affections of many of those who are present this evening; and though I am not afraid to do it, and though I could, were it desirable, answer him *point by point*, (Note B), yet I will not so far transgress the instructions of the Chair, as to follow Dr. Jamieson through such a course of procedure. I venture to think that we are somewhat behind the age in considering this question of the credibility of miracles. John Stuart Mill, in one of his later utterances, admitted that miracles come under the same laws of evidence as all other events, that is to say, if there was satisfactory evidence they must be admitted, like all other events. I believe that it is therefore both unphilosophical and illogical to say that such and such a thing is so wonderful that it could not have happened; and if we pass this resolution as it stands, we shall be behind the age. Then another objection which I make to the resolution is with regard to the word "introduction" of the miraculous element. I think that a fair way of reversing the resolution will be to say, "If you will only eliminate the miraculous element from Christian or Bible history, then we will be influenced by it." Eliminate! introduce! The miraculous element never was introduced into Christianity; it is the foundation and the sole substance of Christianity. Christianity is miracle from first to last. There is one common ground—thank God!—on

which all Christians can meet, and that is the Apostles' Creed. Now almost every article in that Creed is miraculous, with the exception of the solemn central words—"Crucified under Pontius Pilate, dead, and buried." "The miracles of the Bible" (says a seventeenth century writer) "are not like those of Livy, detached pieces which do not disturb the civil history, but are intimately connected with civil affairs, and form a natural and inseparable part. The whole history is founded on them. It consists of little else, and if it were not a history of them, it would be a history of nothing." A third fault to be found with the wording of the resolution is this—it destroys itself. What does religion mean? Religion surely implies a belief in a God; it means the binding of man to God, and the binding of God to man. In almost every religion that has ever existed, there is a miraculous element. I have no occasion to describe here which miracles are true and which are false; I will only remind you that the counterfeit always pre-supposes the existence of the genuine coin. (Note C.) It is an instinct to look for miracles; for where the idea of God is conceived, there surely miracles become possible. We are treating to-night of religion; religion implies the idea of God; and when once the existence of God is admitted, the possibility of miracles cannot be denied. Jean Jacques Rousseau has said that "seriously to raise the question whether God can perform miracles"—and that is the question, whether miracles are credible or incredible—"is absurd; and we should be doing the man who answered the question in the negative too much honour by punishing him; it is sufficient to keep him in custody." "I will freely confess" (says Richard Rothe, a brilliant free-thinking German writer) that up to this hour, I have never been able to discover any stumbling block to my intellect in the conception of a miracle." That,

is the long and short of the question. If we believe honestly in a God, with a free, personal, active will, we cannot think miracles incredible. If we do not believe in a God, of course they are incredible; but when we do believe in a God they come from the incredible into the bounds of the credible. Coming to the definition of a miracle which Dr. Jamieson has expounded, I think I am not betraying confidence when I state that my opponent and myself agreed on this definition; but I mentioned at the time that I considered myself at liberty to bring forward other definitions by way of illustration. The accepted definition was "attesting phenomena, out of accord with"—not contrary to—"the ordinary course of nature, produced by an all-wise, all-powerful and moral being for some wise, necessary and moral end"—of which He, God, is the judge: and I believe that may meet everything my opponent has said—"unattainable by the ordinary operation of natural laws"—but attainable by the extraordinary operation of natural laws. Is that incredible? Strauss defines a miracle as a rent in the world. Is that incredible? I believe it is, if such a rent be supposed to be recklessly made by an all-wise being. But what if the rent be already in the world, and the miracle binds up the wound? Or what do you say to this definition, "A miracle is a fragmentary instance of the eternal order of the Upper World"—a specimen of the events which may be going on beyond our experience. Is that incredible? Omitting many other definitions which have been suggested, I will read only two more. "God's will working without means." I believe we have reached here the very heart of the difficulty. What is most surprising to most men is not that God should work with means, but that he should work without means. I do not think it necessary to explain and account thus for all the miracles in the Bible. The miracle of creation took place without means; if not, an infinitely greater miracle did. The miracle of the introduction of life (which ever springs from previous life, and which some materialist philosophers have endeavoured to explain by germs of life carried to this earth by meteorites from other worlds)—this miracle also occurred, it would seem, without means. And if any doubt the existence of God, I would remind you that you will have to meet a far greater strain upon your credulity than if you believe in a God. It is far harder to believe

that there is not a God than that there is; that creation never occurred than that it did. But in the large majority of instances it would appear that miracles are wrought by a miraculous use of means. The last definition of all, with which I will close this part of my subject, is the definition to be gathered from the New Testament. The word "miracle" means a "wonder." But it is significant that in the New Testament the word "thaumaturgy" is scarcely ever used alone. New Testament miracles are not mere wonders; isolated astonishing events. They are called first "mighty works," showing their origin in power; secondly "signs," showing their object as attesting phenomena; and thirdly "wonders," showing their natural effect. One word more is used chiefly by St. John, the simple word "works;" as much as to say that miracles were as natural to Christ as ordinary work to man.

I proceed next to notice briefly two of the chief arguments against miracles. We are told that miracles are impossible because they are *contrary to experience*. One of the shrewdest things that has ever been said in support of that argument is the saying of Hume's, that it is contrary to experience that miracles should take place, but it is not contrary to experience that people should tell falsehoods. The fallacy lies here: What experience is it? Is it your experience—a poor blind creature of a day, living at the utmost seventy or eighty years—or is it the experience of the past? Whence have you learned, then, this experience of the past? From testimony. But you have just said that testimony is unreliable—that people may tell falsehoods. The testimony of the past against miracles, therefore, is just as unreliable as the testimony in favour of them; if it will not hold good on one side, it will not hold good on the other. (Note D.) It is surely begging the question to say that it is contrary to the experience of the world that miracles have taken place; I am just as much at liberty to say that it is the experience of the past that they have taken place. It cannot be contrary to your, the objector's, experience. With reference to that great and wondrous miracle of the Ascension, for instance—you cannot say that it was contrary to your experience. If you had been on the Mount of Olives when the Lord was received up into the clouds and had seen that the Ascension did not occur, then it would be contrary to your experience. Almost all observations are relative. It has been argued

that it is as impossible that a miracle should have taken place as that two and two should make five; but this is capped by an argument of John Stuart Mill's that in another world, in another state of being, it is not at all impossible that two and two should make five; and therefore surely in that other world where God's power rules it is not impossible that a miracle should take place. Consider how misleading experience has been as to the future. When the proposal was first made in 1814 to light the streets of London with gas, Sir Walter Scott made merry of the idea of making light run under the pavement; Sir Humphry Davy with scorn asked Murdooch if he wanted St. Paul's dome as his gasometer; and Wolaston thought it as *credible* and *possible* that he should light London with a slice from the moon, as with gas. What would these men have said if they had been in Shanghai a few days ago and heard the debate and seen the narrow division on the question of lighting the Settlement with a light running under the streets, or with a "slice from the moon?" If, then, our experience misleads us as to the future, why might it not have misled us as to the past?

Then miracles are said further to be *contrary to the law and order of nature*. My opponent has shown very clearly that that argument is untenable; but if you will allow me I will recur to it again. Notwithstanding all that has been said as to its being weak, this is the great argument against miracles with scientific men—viz., that they transgress the law and order of nature. But observe that the book in which of all others the records of miracles abound, is the book which above all others upholds and adores the order and law of nature. "They continue this day according to Thine ordinance; for all are Thy servants." (Note E.) Before we talk about the law and order of nature being transgressed, we must compass the whole bounds of nature. The present cosmos has been illustrated by the idea of an island. If it be so, we are still far inland; we have not yet reached the shore and heard the sound of the waves; we are ignorant at present of the bounds of nature. How, then, can we say that anything is contrary to the universal law and order of nature? It may be contrary to our short experience; but the whole history of this little planet has been compared to a mote floating across eternal sunshine. How can it be said that miracles are contrary to the law and order of nature? May not the Power which suspends a law

be as natural to the universe as the law itself? These laws are simply inferences drawn by men from their observation of phenomena. But suppose that these are really laws impressed upon nature, is it incredible that this also should have been the order given to nature—"When the Master comes, whatsoever he saith unto you, do it?" Suppose that from some cause, the order of nature was rent.—I do not specify the cause now.—Are not storms and tempests rents in nature? Now the Master comes. He says, "Peace, be still;" and there is a great calm. Blindness is not, surely in accordance with the law of nature, but a rent in nature. The Master comes; he lays his hands on the eyes of one that was born blind, and straightway the blind recovers his sight. Death too is surely a rent in nature. But the Master comes, and Lazarus returns from the gates of the grave, and the widow's heart is made to sing for joy. Is that incredible? In short, if these miracles are carefully examined, not as isolated cases, but as connected with the idea that the Master is come—that great miracle that God became man and lived and died and rose again and ascended into heaven—it will be found that they are all "attesting phenomena" of this great truth. It is perhaps an old and very simple example; but I may remind you that when I raise my hand I distinctly violate a law of nature. It may be said that I am enabled to do this by another law; but if so how can you say that God does not work miracles by another law—by unknown, or higher laws? My opponent's speech which he has just delivered was made by his own will and his own power of argument; and when I raise my hand it is by my own will and my own power; and the antecedent of all miracle in like manner is the will and power of God. And then further the laws of Nature are not found to be absolutely uniform. I might illustrate this by many arguments, but I will content myself with one. It was always supposed, until recently, that each member of the sidereal system revolved from west to east; but one exception has been found. It might be imagined that the rush of air in the other direction would throw the whole solar system into confusion; but it is not so. The two out of the supposed six satellites of Uranus which have been carefully observed are found to revolve from east to west—directly contrary to the supposed law of nature. Sir Charles Lyell has reminded us that "anyone who presumes to dogmatise about the absolute uniformity

of the laws of nature, is rebuked by geological evidences of the changes which that order has already undergone." I would suggest the following as an amendment to the resolution: "Miracles form the natural credentials of a revelation from God to man; and when confirmed by competent witnesses, they arrest our attention, and demand our belief in that revelation." I prefer, however, to move a direct negative to the resolution. Let me conclude with the following extract from Dr. Christlieb's "Christianity and Modern Thought": "The same grave in which modern philosophy strives to bury the miraculous will swallow up everything which gives human existence an ideal character, a true value; the soul made in the Divine image; faith and prayer; the holy person of the Redeemer; the entire system of Christian truth; the future world and the living God. But perchance the work is too great and the arm of the grave diggers too weak to bury all these together."

APPENDIX.

Note A.—"Irrelevant," the speech to which I ventured to apply this epithet, contains these words in the course of its peroration, "I might go on analysing miracle after miracle with the same results. Results which I will formulate thus; that you must give up your God, or give up miracles. There is no middle course."

This dogmatic assertion seemed to me "irrelevant."

(1) As avoiding the subject at the time under debate, namely, whether the miraculous element as such, and not whether the narratives of certain miracles, must be taken to destroy the credibility of Religious History; whether in fact, miracle as miracle is credible.

(2) I deemed the assertion "irrelevant," as embodying a distinct *petitio principii*; for it assumes that since certain miracles cited or to be cited are in the speaker's estimation incompatible with the predicated attributes of God, and therefore for a Theist, untrue; we must conclude that no miracles are forthcoming from Religious History capable of standing this test, and that therefore *all* are false. We are requested to impale ourselves on one horn or the other of this dilemma; either give up God, or abandon miracles. But before doing so, it is permissible to ask whether there be no tertium quid, no third alternative for the believer in God. Such I supplied in my speech by adducing the miracles of the creation of the world, of the introduction of life into a lifeless world, of the Incarnation, Resurrection, and Ascension of the Son of God, of His stilling the storm, healing the blind, and raising the dead. Any

one of which God-like miracles is sufficient to refute the argument as *thus baldly stated*.

The questions as to the effect on the whole document of these supposed flaws; and as to the connection between the Old and New Testaments, were not included at the time in the argument. The alternative was not, no God or no Bible; but simply thus, no God or no miracles; and the conclusion from the premises alleged seemed to me irrelevant and illogical.

Independent reasoners might have replied as follows to either of the points suggested above; that some passages may be interpolated; or that because some miracles are false it by no means follows that none are true; or that they are willing to accept the New Testament and reject the old; and in many different ways the conclusion criticised above might be challenged as unsound. I have no sympathy, however, with such methods; and I meet the allegations directly in Note B., first by showing what a different aspect the miracles criticised wear when carefully studied, and secondly by showing the testimony given to them by the Divine lips of Jesus Christ himself.

Note B.—Point by point.—The argument of Dr. Jamieson was briefly as follows:—The higher our conception of God as "an all wise, almighty, and moral Being," the more incredible do the miracles appear which are ascribed to God. And in illustration of this argument, some instances were adduced chiefly from the Old Testament. I may observe in passing, that to this test, by the general assent of all, the miracles of the Bible must be brought.

The reply as embodied in my speech was only a partial one, to the effect that numbers of the Bible miracles are thus worthy of God, and are *thus far* credible; and my argument on the abstract question of miracles prevented my more fully considering the question.

I.—Observe therefore that one of the highest and noblest attributes of God is His *condescension to the weak and ignorant*. "Who is like unto the Lord our God, who dwelleth on high? who humbleth Himself to behold the things that are in heaven, and on earth." The Incarnation itself, that most wondrous of all miracles, forms the great witness to this attribute of God. The miracles under debate therefore in order to be correctly interpreted, must be viewed as wrought on earth and not in heaven's pure air; and it is to be expected that in their circumstances and accessories much of the earth may appear, and much which we should have deemed unworthy of God, but for this *all-worthy attribute*, namely, God's stooping to man; and His sympathy with even the smallest troubles of His people. The raising of the axe head which had sunk into rushing Jordan, and the special sign given to Hezekiah in his illness, may have light thrown on them by this consideration.

II.—A very careful observation of the *circumstances of each case*, (and such information

is sometime impossible from the vast reaches of time in the history), will be necessary, before we condemn such and such a miracle as unworthy or incredible.

(a) Hezekiah, e.g., was not a mere "Sheikh" or "Kinglet." He was the ruler of the Jewish nation, in whose mysterious history were wrapped up the hopes of "all nations." He was dying childless; and with foreign war at the gates. Was it wholly unworthy or incredible, then, that he should ask and receive a sign from heaven of the promised prolongation of his life; and that remedies tried perhaps in vain before should be rendered specially efficacious? We are told that he was "sick unto death." "Set thine house in order; for thou shalt die, and not live." It was not a simple boil that a Shanghai surgeon could subdue, that is referred to in the text, but a "burning ulcer," one symptom only of the deadly disease which was killing the king.

(b) With reference to the narrative in II. Kings ii., 23-25 (if that narrative fairly comes under the category of miracles at all) it should be observed as throwing some light on a confessedly difficult subject (1) that both the adjective *little* in Hebrew and the word *children* are used with various significations; and that the words may possibly mean *young men*. The same phrase in the same words "a little child" is found in I. Kings iii. 7, of Solomon in adult age, though there possibly figuratively and therefore accurately rendered; and in I. Kings xi. 17 of Hadad, with the double notice, 1.—That he was old enough to run away himself into Egypt, not requiring to be carried, and 2.—That his marriage to the sister-in-law of Pharaoh is mentioned in the next verse, with no apparent long interval of time. A similar phrase "young and tender" is applied to Solomon aged 19 (I. Chron. xxix. 1,) and to Rehoboam aged 40 (2 Chron. xiii. 7.) But I quote these verses rather in illustration of the elastic nature of the phrases; not as definitely deciding the case under debate: (2) observe that when speaking of the punishment which fell, it is specified that "children" (*yeladim* a word frequently used of grown up people, see I. Kings xii., 8, 16, &c.) were "torn;" possibly implying that the elder ring-leaders alone suffered. This distinction of words is carefully preserved in the septuagint. (3) that this word "tear" seems also of doubtful signification; and (4) that at any rate they were not mere saucy grimacing children, but impious, insolent, profane; specimens of the inhabitants of an idolatrous city; and mocking not so much at the "round head" Eliaba, as at that which is often ridiculed in these days: *miracle*—the miracle of Elijah's ascension "Go up."

But here also a full knowledge of the circumstances of the case, would, we are persuaded, abate the difficulty.

(c) With reference to the withering of the barren fig-tree, and the added word "It was not the season of figs;" two points must be observed. (1) It is a well-known fact (see Ederheim and Tristram) that in Palestine the fruit appears before the leaves on fig-trees; and this tree, therefore, precocious as to leaves, should have been precocious also in fruit. Dr. Ederheim quotes from the Talmud to show that unripe figs were eaten by the Jews. (2) The tree was but a symbol by the Jewish nation, or of individuals now; a solemn parable from nature pointing to those who are precocious in profession and barren in action. (See also the long dissertation in Lightfoot's *Horæ Hebraicæ*.)

III.—A very careful observation of the exact words of scripture is necessary, in examining points of difficulty.

(a) It is really wearisome to hear the objection reiterated even by keen and scientific speakers and writers, that the sun standing still for Joshua, and going back for Hezekiah, necessitated the jerking of the sun, or rather of the earth, out of its orbit; and the consequent disturbance of the whole solar system. The text of scripture expressly localizes the miracle in each case; and confines it to a *valley* and a *sundial*. And to common sense readers this would surely suggest the idea that not the body but the *rays* of the sun went back, or stood still. Hezekiah and Joshua would not fail to have thus understood the miracle. So that the miracle though not minimised or explained, (for in this case it would cease to be miracle), yet in no sense interfered with the motions of the heavenly bodies. As a matter of fact the words used for sun and moon in Joshua x. 13, are *shemesh* and *yareach* words which refer to the radiance and not to the orb. (Wordsworth, in loco). Atmospheric refraction is sufficient in the polar regions to cause the sun to appear several days above the horizon after it has really set; and an intensifying of this natural law (wholly miraculous indeed, but in no sense a violation of law and order) is all that the narratives demand.

(b) This same careful attention to the precise words of Scripture will remove much of the difficulty connected with the "hardening of Pharaoh's heart;" and will show that it is a distinct misrepresentation to say that God hardened Pharaoh's heart in order to plague him; or that innocent people suffered for their ruler's sin alone. After two prophecies of the future (Exodus iv. 21, vii. 3), both of which may legitimately be referred to the result or consequence of the intermediate steps, we have the statement seven times repeated that Pharaoh's heart resisted (the true reading of vii. 13, and so both the Septuagint and the Vulgate have it); or "was hardened," "became heavy, resisting sullenly" as the words mean; or directly "he sinned yet more, and hardened his heart; he and his servants" (see vii. 13,

14, 22: viii. 15, 19, 32: ix. 7). And then after this *personal* hardening, we read in ix. 22 and x. 1, etc., that "The Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart." Or even going back behind these references and behind the prophecies, it is plain from Exodus iii. 7, 9, that both the king and *his people*, by a long course of oppression and sin, had become *hard in heart* already. Now after long waiting God withdraws his influence; and the heart is hardened indeed. "Ephraim is joined to idols; let him alone" (Hosea iv. 17), cf. Psalm xcv. 7, 8.

It is doubtless *our* duty to prevent evil, as much as to avoid doing evil; to save life, as not to kill. But if man be a free agent, and not a *machine*, punitive letting alone of the obstinate sinner by God may be both just and necessary: and it is distinctly incorrect to say that God is as responsible for what He permits, as for what He effects. "Deus nunquam dicitur indurare nisi perdit improbus; qui impietate sua diu meruerunt, ut ipsis via conversionis interdicatur," (J. Robertson). This is what is implied in the parallel passage (Romans ix. 17-19).

(c) The same consideration throws light on the numbering of Israel (ii. Sam. xxiv. 1, i. Chron. xxi. 1). David, for his own sin, and the sin of his people Israel, is "left alone" by God for a while; and forthwith Satan occupies the "empty" house.

Now when we reflect that the whole Bible has *external* evidence of the strongest kind, and that to the Old Testament Jesus Christ Himself gave His Divine sanction, one should tread softly and not rush in to criticize, where even angel feet walk warily. For almost any explanation, so long as it be not dishonest and untrue, is preferable to the terrible fancy that Jesus Christ could mislead us.

I have touched but on a very few of these difficulties; I have not ventured to explain them positively or dogmatically; but I have indicated some of the avenues of thought which may possibly lead to the true interpretation of these difficulties. The difficulties are ancient ones; the assault on miracles not of modern date. And mighty minds, and keenest intellects, not in old days alone but also in this restlessly inquiring and pre-eminently scientific age, have been thus satisfied; and have clung and clung still with reverent love and faith to the Bible.

I may add that our recent discussion will do much good if it leads people to read more carefully these sacred books; so that the difficulties as well as the suggested solutions of such, may be, as they ought to be, "at the fingers' ends" not of ministers only, but of all who profess to believe in Christianity.

"The blowing clouds and falling rain" may indeed in Emerson's words be preferable to a startling miracle. But if men will not see the eternal power and Godhead displayed in ordinary Nature, then some mighty work as

a sign and indication of God's presence for judgment or mercy, the true prerogative of genuine miracle, may be abundantly compatible with what we predicate of His Nature and attributes.

Lord Bacon says that "no man believes there is no God but he for whom it makes that there is no God."

Whether this be true or not, it is a solemn reflection that religious history as defined in the Bible is not yet complete. In the future there are to be miracles as in the past. Is it possible that a profound dislike for these coming miracles, the resurrection, the judgment, and the decisions of the Eternal State, acts whether consciously or unconsciously as a prejudiced objector to the miracles related by this same book in the past?

Note C.—*False miracles*.—The question is often asked how are we to distinguish between false miracles and true miracles; and further, where we are to stop if once we admit the miraculous at all. It is not possible within the limits of a short note to answer these questions satisfactorily. I merely suggest the following lines of thought on the subject:—

(1) A similar perplexity meets us when endeavouring to discriminate between the genuine and counterfeit, in art, or in medicine.

(2) All the so-called supernatural is not Divine. The higher orders of creation influence and invade the lower in a manner to these lower very miraculous. Man continually controls and intensifies the forces of nature in a way that nature alone cannot do. It is conceivable therefore that supernatural powers in the demoniacal order "the prince of the power of the air," may work miracles of mischief and deceit, on those who have forfeited by sin God's favour and enlightenment. The magicians of Egypt, etc., may come under this category.

(3) *False* miracles are generally distinguishable by the character of their witnesses; by deliberate fraud; by the want of aim and connection; by grotesque and foolish features. (See the Chapter on False Miracles in Mozley's invaluable book; and compare by all means the Apocryphal Gospels with the Four Gospels of the N. T.)

(4) *True* miracles are not *isolated marvels*, but are wrought in attestation either of God's earlier revelation and preparatory dispensation; or of the full revelation of His mercy in the Gospel. "Confirming the word with signs following" Mark xvi. 20.

(5) Even supposing that some miracles subsequent to the close of the Bible Canon were proved to be true, this would not invalidate the proofs of the Scripture narratives.

(6) Christianity alone of all religions is both founded on and attested by miracle.

(7) "By a denial of the miraculous we do not in the least escape miracles, but only have to believe in greater prodigies."

Note D.—Another grave fallacy in Hume's argument is this.—The question to be decided is not whether it be in accordance with general experience that witnesses should perjure themselves; but whether it be in accordance with experience that persons in a position carefully to investigate proof, should declare that to be true which they knew to be false; and knowingly and deliberately court by the assertion (e. g. of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ) persecution, loss of all things, and death. This surely is directly *contrary* to experience.

Note E.—The remarkable fact that "the products of a true miracle, with their consequences, immediately take their place in the ordinary course of nature," has been alluded to as though it minimized or even destroyed the miraculous element.

But a very different conclusion may well be drawn from the phenomenon. It shows (1) the presence and power of a hand strong enough and wise enough to control, suspend, or counteract, in a way entirely beyond human thought or power, the laws of Nature. And (2) when this miraculous action has performed its legitimate function of a sign, an attestation, an awakening of interest, the miracle worker shows His will that the order of His creation shall be regarded, by thus placing the new products under these laws; or by releasing again the suspended springs of nature. "*Dei voluntas, rerum natura est.*" But that will is not capricious. "For ever O Lord, Thy word is settled in heaven. Thou hast established the earth; and it abideth."



**SHORT ANSWERS TO OBJECTIONS AGAINST
MIRACLES.**

SHORT ANSWERS TO OBJECTIONS AGAINST MIRACLES.

(A LETTER TO THE EDITOR OF THE "N.-C. DAILY NEWS," 12TH MARCH, 1885.)

No answer, point by point, has yet been given, as far as I know, to the several objections against miracles, brought out at the last debate on this subject.* I will then propose the following solutions, which, from their briefness, may be rather incomplete; but they will have the advantage of not taxing the patience of your readers too much, and the subject may be treated more fully hereafter if desired. My intention is to avoid all personal questions. I therefore do not claim to present all the objections in the same terms as they were proposed at the meeting of the Debating Society, from which I was absent. It is sufficient for my object that they embody the substance of them. The reader will judge whether I have succeeded in this. A more complete disquisition on the subject of Miracles and Revelation by another Catholic Missionary will be published in a few days †

Objection 1.—The idea of a revelation is self-contradictory, since it is human reason which must decide whether the revelation must be accepted or not, so that ultimately reason is the only judge.—*Answer*—If that line of argument is valid, it is unreasonable for me even to put any trust in the word of a physician, a lawyer, or any other man more learned than myself, since it is for me to judge whether his advice is such as to be accepted or not. Every one will at once perceive the sophistry of this mode of arguing. That I may accept the assertions of another man, it is not necessary that I be able to form a direct judgment concerning what he tells me: it is sufficient that I may judge whether he is well informed and worthy of credit, for which end ordinary common sense is sufficient, and it is not required that I myself be learned. Thus it is that common sense is sufficient to know that, if God speaks, I must believe what He says.—Now, to be

sure, there may be the further difficulty of knowing whether God has really spoken; but let us for the moment rest content with the answer to the proffered objection, and with showing that the idea of a revelation, far from being self-contradictory, is quite reasonable and bears analogy to the common usage of civil life.

Objection 2—The idea of an authoritative revelation, not approved by our judgment, is self-contradictory.—*Answer*—This proposition is true in one sense, and false in another. It is perfectly true that the revealing authority must propose its titles to credibility, and that our judgment may approve them and must do it. On the other hand, it is false that our judgment always is able to and must directly appreciate what is revealed. For instance, a sick man has the choice between a true physician and a charlatan. It is for his judgment and good sense to choose the one who deserves his confidence. If he is so wise as to choose the physician, he will believe, say, that he has a disease of the heart, because the physician reveals it to him, though he be incapable of controlling by himself the truth of that opinion. In the same way, it belongs to our judgment to discriminate between true religion and false doctrines. The truth of Christianity once recognized, we must believe what Christ has declared concerning a future life, though we are incapable of directly verifying its truth.

Objection 3.—Christians accept miracles on the faith of the revelation which warrants them, and thus are guilty of a *petitio principii*.—*Answer*—The divine inspiration of the Bible once admitted, a Christian admits on its authority the truth of the miracles therein related. But the truth of the miracles which establish the authority of the Bible, and particularly for us Christians that of the miracles of Christ, is previously proved in a different way, namely, by means of tradition and history, that is to say, by means of argument and of human testimony.

* See *N.-C. Daily News*, March 7, 1885.

† *Miracles and Revelation*, a pamphlet by a Catholic Missionary: published by Noronha & Sons, Canton Road.

Such is the way of proceeding with Catholic theologians for proving the truth of religion. They take historical facts as a basis to establish the credibility of revealed dogmas and give to the Bible itself the previous extrinsic proofs without which it does not differ from an ordinary book.

Objection 4.—Natural laws are immutable and do not admit of such exceptions as would constitute miracles.—The *Answer* is obvious. The impossibility of an exception does not exist but for those who refuse to admit any power superior to man and to the forces of nature. Now it is clear that God cannot make such exceptions unless in a manner and for an end worthy of Himself.

Objection 5.—The possibility of recognizing a miracle implies a complete and adequate knowledge of natural laws.—*Answer*—An absolutely adequate knowledge of those laws is unnecessary; it is sufficient to know them to that extent that a man with common sense may, in a given case, judge with certainty that, without the intervention of a superhuman power, there is no proportion between cause and effect. It is sufficient, for instance, to know that, without the intervention of God, a man whose death is well ascertained will never come to life again at the command of another man, and that the forces of nature are not at man's bidding.

Objection 6.—Natural laws are as yet but imperfectly known, and any extraordinary facts which seem to derogate from those laws may well be the effect of a law of a higher order than all those hitherto formulated.—*Answer*—This may be true of extraordinary facts which have no connection with a well known and defined cause, but it cannot be admitted of facts evidently related to a cause of itself totally inadequate, as for instance, when a man born blind instantaneously receives the power of seeing at the command of a man. Moreover, to say that there is no natural law that we know with certainty, is to profess scepticism, and go against the common sense of mankind.

Objection 7.—No modern miracle resists scientific investigation, and as science advances, miracles recede.—*Answer*—It is a gratuitous assertion. *Quod gratis affirmatur gratis negatur.*

Objection 8.—Miracles must have an end which cannot be obtained by the action of natural laws alone.—The *Answer* is that it is sufficient that the end be useful and worthy of God. That end generally is to countenance a mission given by God to a man.

Objection 9.—A number of Scripture miracles show God as being capricious, unreasonable, immoral. *Answer* :—1st, that, although they appear such to certain minds, yet, from the dawn of Christianity up to our own days, they have been judged quite differently by men nowise less distinguished for learning and virtue; the shafts of ridicule, a favourite weapon with Voltaire and his school, have always been deemed a poor way of arguing by all serious minds.—2nd, that the difficult passages of Scripture have been examined and elucidated in a satisfactory manner, centuries ago, by men versed in Biblical studies.

I beg to add a few words of explanation with regard to the miracles adduced as examples.

a.—Hardening of Pharaoh's heart by God Himself.—It is an idiom of Scripture language, meaning: I shall let Pharaoh harden his heart. Calvin maintains that that hardening was the work of God Himself. All Catholics are against that interpretation, as may be seen in the commentaries of *Cornelius a Lapide* in *Exod.* cap. vii. St. Augustin also treats the question (*Questiones super Exodum*, lib. ii., quæst. 18, 24, 29, 30, 36, 37) and quæst. 29 remarks that we find in Scripture the following words (*Ex. viii. 15*) "and Pharaoh, seeing that rest was given, *hardened his own heart*, and did not hear them." "Dicit Scriptura," says St. Augustin, quæst. 37 "*indurasse Dominum cor Pharaonis, beneficio utique suo, et patientia sua, qua ille fiebat obstinatus, dum ei parceretur, sicut omnia mala corda hominum patientia Dei male utendo durescunt.*" And besides, could it not be said that the people of Pharaoh who had joined their king in persecuting the Jews with the most horrible cruelty, for nearly two centuries, deserved the punishment they received in the tenth plague?

b.—An infinite and omnipotent Being must be morally responsible for whatever he permits.—*Answer*—This objection is not a new one. It is a gratuitous assertion far from evident, and to which the greatest minds have refused their assent. God is not bound to do what is best, nor to prevent all evil He could prevent by His omnipotence. Besides, in consequence of the distinction of personality between God and man, God is not the author of the evil acts of man.

c.—God himself incited David to do an act for which He was to punish all the people.—So it would appear from the rather obscure text of the 2nd Book of Kings, ch. xxiv.

v. i.; but the very clear text of the 1st Book of Paralipomena, ch. xxi, v. 1, shows that it was not God but Satan that incited David to number the people. "And Satan rose up against Israel and moved David to number Israel." In the same way as one passage of an author must be explained by another of the same, so is Scripture, in obscure places, to be explained by Scripture.

d.—Punishment of an innocent people for the sin of the prince or for a trifling sin of their own.—This objection is groundless except with those who do not admit of a future life in which God, the sovereign Lord, will give reward or punishment for good and bad actions. God tries man in this life and may decree the death even of those He loves best.

At least the text makes it clear that it was "the Lord" who instigated or caused to be instigated an action which he had determined to punish.—*Answer*—What appears from the text is that God had permitted the act and nothing more.

e.—Trifling miracles, the end of which is unworthy of God.—Those trifling miracles had a very important end, namely to show how God was with his messengers.

f.—The fact of God's having altered or stopped the earth's rotation is quite inadmissible.—There is every reason to believe that God, to send back the shadow on the dial, did not resort to that means, but employed others much simpler and of less import, as for instance a local action on the luminous undulations of ether.

g.—The supposition that the retrogradation of the shadow on Achaz's dial was produced by some local interference is destructive to the view which it is framed to support.—*Answer*—The miracle thus explained is free from inconvenience for the general order of nature, but it is no less a miracle and attains its end, which was to show how God was with his messenger.

h.—Extra-natural interferences limited to any area, however small, and the most stupendous interruptions of cosmical order are equally credible or incredible. *Answer*.—They have the same value for proof. But God, in His wisdom, will rather use the small than the great intervention, when the former is sufficient for the end He has in view. Men of good sense also act similarly in human affairs.

Objection 10.—If any historical document is held to say one thing, while another thing is meant, its claims to independent authority instantly vanish.—*Answer*—The objection is valid if the interpretation is not reasonable; otherwise it is the objection itself that vanishes.

Objection 11.—Stronger proofs are required for miracles than for ordinary events.—*Answer*—The proofs for miracles are of the same order as those required for human affairs of importance. For the Gospel miracles, the proof resulting from the establishment and preservation of Christianity and of its being admitted in all ages by men numbered among the most learned, is as strong an indirect proof as can be imagined.

Objection 12.—God is easily prayed to for a change of weather, for the laws of meteorology are but little ascertained as yet, but He will not be prayed to for a change in the course of the heavenly bodies, the laws of astronomy being now well known.—*Answer*—Whenever God interferes with the operation of a natural law, He avoids disturbing the general order of the Universe and does nothing but what is useful. Now, a real change in the course of the heavenly bodies would be either useless or attended with too momentous consequences. Not so in the order of meteorology, as with regard to wind and rain. Such is doubtless the reason why one kind of phenomena and not others will easily be prayed for.

A ROMAN CATHOLIC PRIEST.





